Learning from a FIASCO: Design in Conversation with Social Science Research

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ABSTRACT
FIASCO is a location-based game that takes place on a website and on street corners. Designed to promote exploration and player reflection on the use of public space, FIASCO was developed using methods inspired by Situationist urban theory. The tension between FIASCO as a game in its own right and as a research probe has spurred the authors to consider on the consequences of game design as a research method.

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Design research, Game design, Iterative design, Reflective design, Situationist theory, User interface design,

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INTRODUCTION: DESIGN CONTEXT

Now the city would move like a map you were drawing; now you would begin to live your life like a book you were writing. Called forth by a street or a building, an ensemble of gestures might imply that a different city had to be built or an old one overthrown. [16]

Until the 1980s, New York streets — dangerous, dirty, and derelict as they appeared — were also playgrounds. [15] Street games such as stickball, marbles, hopscotch and jump rope are no longer as acceptable, especially in downtown Manhattan. Instead, the public space of the street has been co- by private entities as a commercial zone.

[9] The current boredom of cities is the erasure of neighborhood identity through the pervasive sameness of chain stores. New York children still play in the streets, but the recreational activity of choice is more likely to be shopping.

In contemporary America, the park system is the main sponsor of public, physical play. Parks provide necessary green space in cramped cities, but they also regulate and systematize recreation. We play sports on the field; sun ourselves on lawns; run on the official jog path around the reservoir. Just as it allocates zones for work, sleep, and transportation, the city also designates a place for play.

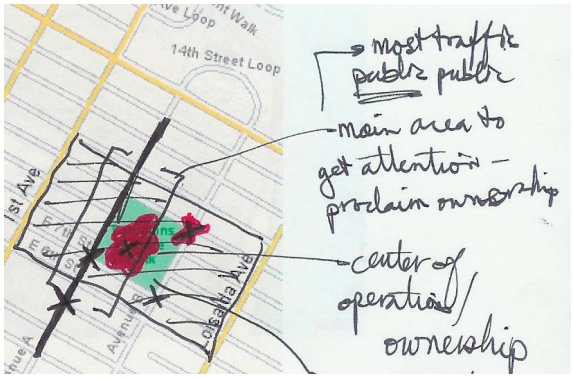
What is FIASCO

FIASCO is a game of physical action with virtual consequences. Using New York City as a game board and networked telecommunications as dice, players conquer and control turf – as represented on virtual map of the city – by performing and documenting game moves on the real-world streets of the city.

We designed FIASCO to encourage "ordinary" New Yorkers to imagine and perform physical responses to an increasingly regulated public sphere In doing so, we hoped to see transform their relationships – and the relationships of passersby – to public spaces in New York. By linking game success to exploration of territory, we also hoped to encourage players to question their own relationship to "turf," and to move beyond their habitual haunts into new territories.

Even game rules that seem arbitrary are in service to implicit understanding that the purpose of games is "fun." The word fun encompasses a complicated set of temporally and geographically specific behaviors and assumptions. We were less concerned with "dissecting fun" [1] as a cultural construct than we were with pragmatically employing fun interactions in the context of New York to make sure we have a user base at all. Though we later applied FIASCO to a research agenda, it still functions as a game design project. If an interactive system defined as a game is not fun, our "users" will not continue to play along.

One of our players, a 30-year-old New Yorker, defined fun in the context of city life as "faster, stupider, and more retarded." Not so much anti-intellectual as *a-rational*, this vision of fun rejects the adult norms of patience, politeness,



A sketching exercise (detail) suggests that one user views location as a key element of "winning" in a social game.

and thoughtfulness. In a world of industry and intellect, it is a *waste of time*. And from that comes its power.

The Situationist critique

Beginning in the 1950s, a group of young artists and intellectuals in France decided that utopian ideologies of urban planning concealed a metropolis of regimentation, empty consumption, and ultimately boredom. They called themselves the Situationists. As one slogan put it in 1967, "The guarantee that we will not die of starvation has been purchased with the guarantee that we will die of boredom." [16] They saw the city as a living organism held hostage by the demands of capitalism. In wandering the streets according to game-like rules or momentary whims, they sought to revitalize urban experience by constructing new "situations." Situationist artistic interventions employed randomness, absurdity, and satire. Their collaged papers, writings, experiments and dramas was an analogue of their willingness to tear the city grid apart to build a better one. The most prominent of these experiments was the *dérive*, or "drift," where individuals abandon normal everyday practices in favor of alternate acts dictated by the urban terrain and encounters found therein. [2]

A child of Situationism, psychogeography maps emotional and psychological affect onto geographic location [3]. They use chance and coincidence to interpret geography through personal memories, aesthetic affect, and random social encounters. In order to avoid familiar routes and force exploration, some psychogeographers follow walking algorithms" [20] (ie, "Take the first left. Walk three paces. What is the first color you see?"). Psychogeography replaces the goal-directed travel of the commute and the aimless wandering of flâneurie with algorithmic tourism. That is, it uses the logic of games to rethink urban mobility and construct new maps.

Recent responses

Attempts to "reclaim the streets" as a site for play have flourished in recent years, as evidenced by the international Reclaim the Streets movement's slogan of "celebration as direct action; dance as resistance." [9] In America, the Cacophony Society, self-proclaimed "dada clowns rewiring the neural circuits of the community" through "meaningless madness," have branches in several cities [8]. Following McKenzie's theory of performance as at once artistic practice and technological imperative [17], public play can be a source of creative ***malfunction***, making alternatives to the norm of efficiency visible.

CREATING A FIASCO

Design process

Inspired by Situationist methods, our design process for FIASCO traced a virtual dérive through the Internet, art practice, and gaming communities. Using the Google search engine, we assembled large collections of images and phrases associated with urban games and the built environment. To juxtapose unexpected concepts, we borrowed a creative strategy from the painter Mark Tansey, who finds inspiration for his fictional "history" paintings by spinning a set of interlocking wooden wheels engraved with lists of elements, then responding to the combinations that result [19] We also adopted the approach of Vito Acconci, whose "Following Project" documents a series of games he played with strangers [11]. After picking a stranger at random from crowds in New York, Acconci trailed and photographed the chosen target until the target entered a a private space. Selections from the resulting photographs were then displayed. Both Acconci and Tansey use game logic ("spin the wheel three times" or "follow the first stranger you see") to generate unexpected and creatively energizing outcomes.

We generated our own urban outcomes by writing down examples from the urban street games we had researched, attributes of the urban environment that we had found through our research, and common New York situations on slips of paper. Then we randomly chose one slip from each element. We and others found the results so fun that we incorporated them into the game as the "stunt" component of FIASCO.

Photographs from game play. The player on the left won the round.

We also looked at successful contemporary urban games. In particular, we looked at the online aspects of Geocaching, a game in which players attempt to find small boxes hidden in public places with the help of Global Positioning Systems (GPS) and a few written clues. The game is not centrally managed; players decide when and where to hide boxes. Yet a website functions as a key intermediary, storing the necessary lists of GPS coordinates and providing a space for players to tell stories about their adventures in the physical world [10], find other players for new hunts, and find less experience players to mentor. We also looked at a weekly softball match in a New York park that brings together a changing roster of amateurs. The convention of "the pickup game" enables casual players to play sports together without prior social acquaintance or commitment to an organized league.

How to play

Based on techniques for improvisational theater games [17], game moves in FIASCO ("stunts") have three components: an object, an action, and a theme. An object can be any item often found in a city, such as coffee cups, newspapers, fire hydrants, street signs, bricks, and asphalt. An action can be any traditional outdoor game such as hopscotch, hide-and-go-seek and tag. A theme is an event or situation prevalent in metropolitan life, such as "happy hour," "vice," "border crossing." It is a wild card that affects how the other two components are understood. Players may incorporate these components as they like, but all of them must be present in the documentation.

Location is an implicit fourth element of a stunt. Each stunt is associated with a node, which is the street corner in New York where the stunt took place. Nodes are marked on the virtual map with their owners' tags. Because stunts are always situated within a specific neighborhood or even street corner, they must be judged *in context*. The same behavior that is amusing in a children's park might be less so on a deserted residential street.

Uploading photographs of a stunt to the website begins the rating process, in which the online community rates the amusement value of the stunt concept and accompanying photographs. When players battle for control over a node, the stunt with the highest rating takes possession of it – until another challenger comes along.

Prompting reflection in game play and design

As part of the game design process, we began by using ourselves as game testers and discovered much to our surprise how the direct experience allowed for greater reflection on game design. While logical in theory, our assumptions for how gameplay within the physical context of the street would play out, were in practice – misguided.

While we seek to foster spontaneity, physical gameplay unlike its virtual counterpart, presents players with unexpected complications created by specific conditions of time and place. Getting to the site, gathering elements, and managing the audience (ranging from impatient students, rowdy passersby, and the police in one case) are hurdles confronting the game in both the creation of rules and the space of play.

However, as a hybrid game FIASCO extends some freedoms of the traditional online gaming world into the physical streets of the city. As a self-enclosed, artificial system, the structure of FIASCO empowers players to perform actions they wouldn't consider otherwise, almost as if the suspended reality of video games can be applied to the real world setting. The unexpected juxtapositions created by dense urban populations create game play that would be impossible in virtual worlds, where the programmers of the game mandate what is possible within its structure. FIASCO teaches the importance of embodied action in the city, where public gestures can promote personal transformation.

FIASCO as research lens

Though FIASCO began as a project in game design at New York University's Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP), it has since been transformed into a research probe at Intel's People and Practices Research (PaPR). While we still hope to enable enjoyable play, we also hope to advance a research agenda. Aspects of the game such as debating the rules, navigating the map, and creating alliances can shed light on technology use and construction of self in social interactions that increasingly mesh virtual and physical means.

By turning users into players, we anticipate more engaged and active participation in testing, and thus richer qualitative research findings. Given that disruptive behavior and resource-intensive use (and misuse) is a normal part of game-play [18], we hope to learn what happens at the edges of our system's planned functionality. In trial play of an early prototype, we saw not only orthodox interpretations of "the rules," but also deliberate transgressions. More recently, participatory design exercises to create an interface to the city map have triggered an examination of how sense of place informs our players' public performance of identity and social affinity.

Fallman makes a useful distinction between "knowledge-generating" research and "artifact-generating" design [5]. Yet positing playability as a partial goal of our research softens the boundaries between the two. FIASCO exists within a feedback loop in which the game exists not just as a product of research or as finite step in the research process [14], but in dialogue with HCI's traditional forms of social inquiry. Game play can be called a form of "user testing" which improves the game and gives us insight into how players understand the cultural place of the game itself.

FIASCO is an experiment in partial lack of control. We will not regulate who plays FIASCO, or how they play it, or what kind of documentation they provide. While we have recruited players for previous trials, there is no guarantee that a full beta test of FIASCO will ever find an audience of players. We accept that FIASCO may fail *as a game* because of our design choices, which will have implications for the research agenda.

PLAYING GAMES WITH HCI

Design and human-computer interaction research are the inheritors of very different traditions of pedagogy – the studio versus the lab. At times, the gulf between the priorities of the two disciplines has been reduced to one pithy dichotomy: "ease of use" versus "fun of use." Certainly, there has been in HCI a preoccupation with "the values of the workplace: concerns for clarity, efficiency and productivity." [6]

But researchers are increasingly moving to more playful explorations with props and theatrical games, as with Iacucci, Kuutti, and Ranta's "magic things" used to support development of mobile devices. [12]

The graffiti-inspired audio boxes of *Tejp* [13] and the psychologically fraught domestic appliances of the *Placebo Project* [4] deliberately create playful or ambiguous experiences as a means, not only as an end, of research. Because their proper use is left as a question for users, they encourage active participation in the construction of meaning through experimentation and play.

Similarly, "domestic probes" have been used within the design process to "subvert expectations about research" [6]. The designed objects inspired by those probes were then distributed to volunteers who "live with them, make sense of them" to continue the research process [7].

More structured play has also been used to fuel the design process. Jacobs, Polizzi and Andersen use playful, rule-based activities to create artifacts and generate insights that then inform the design of interactive systems [14].

Games are different than play

Related, but not identical, human activities, games and play can be seen as subsets of each other. Games are playful activities, but "play" is one component of games. Zimmerman offers a definition of games that help us separate the ends and means of FIASCO from other kinds of research that use formal or informal play: "A *game* is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome." [18]. Play is one step in the iterative game design process, not just the final result [18]. Game design is a reflective practice, as designers evaluate games by playing them, incorporating improvements, and playing the game again.

CONCLUSION

FIASCO has become an opportunity for us as researchers and design practitioners to critically approach a condition that researchers have traditionally tried to minimize: loss of control. Rules control play, yet games also present opportunities for misuse. If the user as player may quit if the game is unsatisfying – or cheat if winning becomes everything – how does this effect the researcher's privileged status? Games cannot be simply slotted into the barrage of traditional research methods and agendas without altering the power relationships that traditionally underwrite the authority of the representatives of HCI as a discipline. In developing a game to be played publicly we have left the door wide open for unexpected interpretations of gameplay which may or may not prove beneficial to the design process. Putting failure within the context of game design research allows us to reflect on the control we give up to users: our inability and disinterest in creating a system players cannot game.

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